Is "Adaptation" the Right Question? Addressing the Larger Context of Administrative Segregation: Commentary on *One Year Longitudinal Study of the Psychological Effects of Administrative Segregation*

By Lorna A. Rhodes and David Lovell

Abstract

This article questions whether a longitudinal study from the Colorado Department of Corrections on the psychological effects of administrative segregation adequately addresses the context within which supermax confinement occurs. Pointing to institutional dynamics and contradictory psychological effects, as well as to the unintended consequences of psychological testing, this article suggests that "adaptation to supermax" should not be taken at face value. Rather, supermax produces a variety of harms to prisoners, staff, and communities that require attention not only to individuals, but also to the larger contexts of long-term incarceration.

Key words: adaptation, administrative segregation, Colorado, institutional environment, psychological effects, solitary confinement, supermax prisons.

NIC
National Institute of Corrections

Introduction

Maureen O'Keefe and a team of University of Colorado researchers have completed their *One-Year Longitudinal Study of the Psychological Effects of Administrative Segregation* (O'Keefe et al., 2010) at an interesting moment. Over the past 20 or so years the use of solitary confinement in the United States has become increasingly visible. Although little systematic research on supermax prisoners has been allowed by corrections departments, the available studies suggest that prolonged isolation is harmful to both mentally ill and non-mentally ill prisoners (Grassian & Freedman, 1986; Haney, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 1977, 2000; Kurki & Morris, 2001; Pizarro & Stenius, 2004; Rhodes, 2004; Scharf Smith, 2006).

Critics of the practice insist that these studies, as well as simple common sense, point to the need for alternatives to long-term segregation and a rethinking of our approach to the management of disturbed and disruptive inmates. At the same time, intensive confinement is increasingly normalized, frequently depicted on television, and routinely employed in military operations. In their study of administrative segregation (AS) in Colorado, O'Keefe et al. (2010) interject two factors into this situation: standardized psychological testing and the passage of time.

"The most significant issue," write O'Keefe et al., "is the question of whether prisoners are able to psychologically adapt to the conditions of AS." Our question here is whether this is the right question. What does it mean to "adapt" and, if such adaptation does occur, is that a positive development or rather harmful not only for prisoners themselves but for those around them?

In this article, we will approach our reframing of the study's question in three ways. First, we will briefly consider some aspects of placement in segregation and of the testing situation that are not addressed in the study and whose omission radically decontextualizes the situation of the study's subjects. Second, we will suggest that the larger institutional environment not only contributes to the isolation of AS prisoners, but also influences the framing of their situation in terms of adaptation, raising the question of what a more systemic approach would need to include. Finally, we argue that the framework underlying the measures and methods of the Colorado study reinforces the very problem it tries to address by focusing on the individual as an isolated psyche rather than as a fundamentally social being.

Context

Regardless of whether this study accurately describes the trajectory of the Colorado supermax prisoners, the fact that it was conducted at all is remarkable and deserving of appreciation. That the authors consulted with critics of solitary confinement such as Human Rights Watch's Jamie Fellner, a member of the study's Advisory Board, and Boston-area psychiatrist Stuart Grassian (2010), drew extensively on the available literature to develop their questions, and were allowed access to the Colorado system speaks to an attempt to provide a much-needed assessment of the effects of supermax and a willingness to accept whatever conclusions emerged. Further, it is clear that the study's authors are surprised by their own findings; their conclusions include well-framed warnings against misinterpretation and over-generalization.

Thus even on its own terms the study is not a ringing endorsement for long-term solitary confinement. Nevertheless, its findings—based on testing procedures and statistical analyses likely to impress the lay reader—may be taken as definitive support for the nonharmfulness of supermax, especially within corrections. Thus although we attend in this piece to larger problems with the study and our focus is not on whether it accurately depicts deterioration in supermax, we want to emphasize that this question is of great importance and in obvious need of additional research.

Method

The assumption guiding the Colorado study is that the condition of individual prisoners can be known through psychological testing and, further, that such testing is adequate to an analysis of the effects of time passed in isolation. Minimal use of staff reports and inmate records supplemented testing, but it is clear these materials were not significant for the researchers' primary aims. The materials used in this study are based on behavioral observation, structured laboratory-type tests, or self-report on pencil-and-paper forms, with the exception of the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS), which usually involves structured questions and observations of clinical subjects.

In this study the BPRS is classified as a "clinician observation" rating: "Some of the items can be rated after observation of the patient; others require clinical interview to obtain the patient's self-report

information." The interviews are not described, however, and, furthermore, the BPRS appeared the least reliable of the measures used in Colorado, in contrast to our University of Washington study of administrative segregation inmates (Cloyes et al., 2006; Lovell, 2008), in which the BPRS was completed in the course of a longer interview about prisoners' attitudes and responses to long-term segregation.

Our point here is not to critique the set of instruments used in this study, although legitimate questions may be raised about them; we are bracketing the question of psychometric validity. Our doubts about whether the right question is being asked, however, are reinforced by the observation that interviewing inmates did not appear important to answering it.

Decontextualizing the individual

The other piece missing in the question being asked is that it did not appear relevant to establish a connection between what happened in the testing situation and what was happening in the world around the subjects. As long ago as 1972, Harré and Secord criticized the predominant method in psychology—experiments conducted in a laboratory setting—as an unreal abstraction that largely bypasses genuine explanations of human behavior, in which what we feel, think, and do is bound up with our socially structured relations with others. Nevertheless, the questions in the Colorado study were framed to leave no room for any approach but pencil-and-paper or formally administered tests.

Decades of research by prominent prison scholars such as Hans Toch (e.g., Toch, 1977, 2002), are predicated on an analysis of how individuals cope with environments, over time. In the Colorado study, however, basic conditions of confinement (exercise time, meal service, reward system) are described, but there is no discussion of institutional dynamics. Thus in this study the prisoner-in-isolation is not understood as living in a social context consisting of his pod, his unit, the larger prison and prison system, his history within the system, and his history (other than trauma) prior to incarceration.

This decontextualizing of the individual has several consequences:

First, there is no exploration of the meaning of confinement to the prisoner. For example, while the Colorado Department of Correction claims that no protective custody prisoners live under AS, it is

overwhelmingly likely that in fact some of the prisoners interviewed had "self-placed" in segregation through deliberate fights and other misbehavior (Lovell et al., 2000; Lovell, 2008; Rhodes, 2004; Toch, 1977). The sense of control thus generated may well influence how an inmate experiences isolation. For some prisoners, in addition, tighter confinement produces a sense of safety based not only on experiences of general population, but also as a result of prior frightening or abusive treatment. Without knowing more about the meaning of confinement to the prisoner it is hard to determine what "stabilization" actually means.

Second, prisoners respond differently to segregation depending on whether or not they regard it as fair or justified. The history of the prisoner's placement, whether or not his friends or enemies are confined at the same time or in the same pod, and the extent to which he is afraid of real or imagined threats all may impinge on how isolation is perceived.

Third, as Grassian and others have pointed out, many prisoners have good reason to conceal symptoms that might reveal weakness or cause them to be labeled mentally ill. It also seems likely that these symptoms would be easier to conceal on written tests and that the presence of the staff or students administering the tests might have increased the likelihood that prisoners tried to appear "strong," without the checks and balances afforded by more probing interviews.

Fourth, Colorado uses a 3-step system in which substantial privileges (in comparison to many other systems) are given after a short period of good behavior, including such items as drawing materials, three books at a time, and a bingo game with a reward. Some of the negative effects of isolation and sensory deprivation may be alleviated by these small sources of stimulation, as well as by the fact that staff make frequent rounds to check on prisoners in their cells. Many prisoners and their interlocutors remark that seemingly trivial changes in the environment of solitary confinement (whether it is colder or hotter, the amount of light, small events to look forward to) can make a difference in how it is experienced. We do not know whether this is part of the explanation for the findings of the Colorado study, but our work in Washington prisons makes it reasonable to assume that seemingly minor adjustments to prison regimen make a differences to prisoners' stress levels and degree of deterioration (Lovell, 2008; Rhodes, 2004).

Finally, O'Keefe et al. note that prisoners at the Colorado facility communicate with one another through sign language and by shouting across their pods. Such interaction is common in intensive confinement settings and can have both positive and negative effects on quality of life (Rhodes, 2005). It may be that frequent rounds conducted by staff have the effect of diminishing persecutory conversations. The removal of the most seriously disturbed prisoners to a mental health facility, as appears to happen in Colorado, may also contribute to a relatively non-toxic interpersonal environment in the facility's pods.

Sidestepping institutional dynamics

The growth of supermax confinement in the United States reflects conditions in prison systems in general, particularly overcrowding. Reliance on isolation enables prison systems to work around conflicts generated by practices in general population and to focus blame for violence or disruptiveness on individual "behavior problems." Evidence of the effect of this approach on levels of prison violence is weak at best (Briggs & Sundt, 2003). By virtue of the limited methods employed, the Colorado study narrowly frames the issue of confinement and sidesteps what the use of such confinement shows about institutional dynamics, limitations, and expectations.

This is not just a matter of the details of the AS regime, but rather of the institution as a whole. What are conditions like in general population? If prisoners "improve" during the early period of solitary confinement, is it a reflection on a larger custodial environment that is crowded, dangerous, and stressful? Are there important contrasts between staff behavior in AS and the rest of the prison; for example does segregation result in increased staff attention as a result of regular rounds?

In other words, what does it mean to talk about "adaptation" to isolation in the context of the prison environment? The assumption behind the study is that an "adapted" prisoner will remain (or become more) psychologically stable. But the meanings of such stability may depend on the ways in which the institution impinges on the individual. An example is the "strong-minded," seemingly resilient inmate who manages isolation by becoming increasingly dedicated to an extreme ideology such as neo-Nazism. Such an individual has adapted to his situation, but has become unfit for social life. Evidence based on the release of inmates from isolation directly to the streets suggests that adaptation to solitary confinement is in itself a form of pathology (Lovell, Johnson & Cain, 2007).

Conclusion

The omission of the institutional environment points to a larger, and to our minds, the most serious, issue with the Colorado study. Supermax prisons are designed to be nonrelational environments and are seen as an appropriate response to prisoners who exhibit problems with relationship—who are, in some respect, anti- or non-social.

But this formulation obscures two things: First, it takes the work of many people—that is, social projects of planning, managing, maintaining-- to produce the supermax environment. The prisoner who is embedded in the world thus produced is indeed isolated, but he is isolated within a set of assumptions about what a person is, how people learn, and what individuals do and do not deserve. Second, the harm caused by this isolation is more than an individual matter. What is harmed by supermax is *relationship*: of the prisoner to himself and to those around him, of the staff members who find themselves similarly isolated, and of the community to those it punishes.

Seen from this perspective, damage to the mind is only one of the harms of isolation, and it may be that one reason the study did not find it is that insufficient attention was paid, not only to individuals but to the "individual-in-his world." Because the researchers did not talk to prisoners, they could not get at the many ways in which relational harm occurs. Further, as noted above, this relational harm may include such responses as "strength" expressed in negative affiliations as well as withdrawal from family, good behavior that masks an inability to tolerate the proximity of other human beings, and other paradoxical responses.

Thus the "adaptation to isolation" tested by the Colorado study is not the solution to supermax confinement; rather, it is a problem not only for the individual, but also ultimately for those around him. We should ask instead whether requiring individuals to adapt to extreme conditions, and then approaching them as the nonrelational beings that those conditions suggest, does more than potentially justify solitary confinement as the study's authors rightly fear. Perhaps it also reinforces the underlying assumptions that make solitary confinement appear as the logical solution to problems within prison systems.

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